

The Practice of Mindfulness

by Thich Nhat Hanh

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Good morning my dear friends. Today is the twenty-third of July, 1998 and we are in the Upper Hamlet. I will speak in English today.

Thank you, young people, for having performed opinion lines. You did very well, but I have to confess that some of you spoke too quickly, and I could not get all of the words. I don't know how much time each of you spends sitting in front of your television sets. I hear that there are children who spend up to three hours a day sitting in front of the TV screen, but I don't know whether that is true or not. Three hours, or four hours, that is a little bit too much. Some grownup people use television as a kind of baby-sitter. They don't have the time to take care of their children, so they ask the television to be a baby-sitter for them. I remember, about ten years ago, I organized a retreat just for young people in Santa Barbara. Many hundreds of children came, because that retreat was for children alone. I have conducted a number of retreats like that in North America and in Europe; a lot of children came, and their parents also came to support them. Dharma talks, Dharma discussions, lemonade meditation, everything was created just for young people. Among these children there were those who had been in retreats, that is why they knew the practice, they enjoyed the practice, and they helped the other children to join the practice, so it was a wonderful retreat. I think I had two retreats like that in a row, in Santa Barbara.

I remember that during one of the retreats, a little girl about eight years old came up to me with a sheet of paper on which she had very carefully written the sentence: "I vow not to watch television on weekdays." That statement was made after a Dharma discussion by the children, who discussed how we should deal with television, how much time we should spend for television, and what kind of programs we should watch and what kind of programs we should refrain from watching. That is why that young lady came up to me with a sheet of paper with that sentence: "No television on weekdays." She wrote that sentence several times on that sheet of paper—just one sentence, and when I turned it to the other side, the same thing was written again. It means that she had really made up her mind not to watch television on weekdays. And when I asked her why, she said, "Because I want to have more time for my studies, to have more time to be with my Mommy, my Daddy, my brother, my sister; that is why is promise with you, Thay, and the Sangha, that I will not watch television a lot like before. I decided that I will watch television only on weekends. I asked what were the other reasons, and she said, "On television there is bad stuff, and that is one of the reasons why I will watch the TV less." I was pleased with her practice, and I told the story to other children in the retreat, and I asked whether there was anyone in the retreat who would like to join that young lady in practicing the same kind of thing, meaning to watch television less, specially on weekdays. To my surprise, more than twenty children came up and made the same kind of commitment, not to watch television on weekdays. All of them promised that they would go back to their rooms and write the same kind of sentence on both sides of a sheet of paper. I took all these sheets of paper. I believe that all of these children were very sincere when they made the commitment, and that also made me happy.

You know, television is sometimes wonderful, and there are very beautiful programs. You can learn a lot from watching television. You can learn about the lives of animals and of flowers, and about the lives of people in other countries far away. You can learn a lot, and I feel very thankful to those who create such programs so we can learn without having to go out a lot. But I also observe that there are many bad television programs, and when we look at these programs we receive a lot of poisons, as when we eat something that is not healthy, we get poisons in our stomach, and we get sick. So television is a kind of food, and we have to be careful, we have to be very mindful when consuming television. You know that if you consume edible food unmindfully, you can get sick, you might have diarrhea and other things. The same thing happens when you consume television without mindfulness. There is a lot of fear, violence, craving, suspicion, and hatred in many programs, and if we allow ourselves to be penetrated by these poisons we will not have good mental health. I think that people who have depression have watched a lot of television and have gotten in touch with a lot of negative things in their daily life, and that is why they get sick mentally. That is why our practice is to be mindful in consuming edible food, and television. So I wish that today you will have a Dharma discussion and continue the discussion in the opinion line. I would like to hear from you, after your Dharma discussion, about your determination of how to use your television set.

I learned that in North America many people are enlightened concerning smoking. They know that smoking is not good for their health. That is why many people in North America have stopped smoking. Not many people in my country have stopped smoking. I am very sad about that, and I would like the people in my country to stop smoking.

Many people get sick because of smoking, because of nicotine. About ten or fifteen years ago, every time I took the train or the bus or the airplane, I was very afraid of sitting close to someone who smoked. I suffered a lot because of the cigarette smoke. But now there are air companies that offer us non-smoking flights. That's wonderful. There are many non-smoking flights, even in France. I think there must be many of us who have been working silently and continuously in order to increase awareness that smoking is hazardous to our health. It is wonderful to see on every package of cigarettes in America that wonderful sentence: "Be aware—smoking may be hazardous to your health." An awakening, enlightenment on the dangers of smoking, has been made into law. If you produce cigarettes, you have to put that label on each package of your cigarettes; otherwise it would be against the law. That is why I think our American friends have been wonderful in working on that aspect of enlightenment, so that mindfulness regarding smoking has become daily life.

We have to step up our efforts regarding other aspects of our daily life. I would like to urge that our American friends do something similar with television sets. I wish that someday, when we go to buy a TV set, we will see stuck on each TV set the same kind of sentence: "Be aware—if you are not mindful, this can be very toxic, and can bring you a lot of suffering." This is our practice, mindfulness of consuming. When we sit around a table, about to eat our dinner or lunch, we should have enough time to practice breathing in and breathing out, and to look deeply into the food that we are going to eat, to see whether this food contains poisons or toxins. There are many kinds of food that are not good for us, and if we eat them, we'll suffer later on. It may be half an hour later, it may be two hours later. That is why before eating something you have to practice mindfulness of breathing and look deeply to see whether the food is good for you or not. The food might be okay for other people, but for you it's not good. That's why you have to be very careful. In Plum Village we call that kind of practice "mindfulness of eating, mindfulness of drinking."

We should also apply it in other aspects, such as when you pick up a newspaper, when you are about to read an article, when you pick up a novel, you should also breathe in and out and smile, and look deeply to see whether what you are going to read will bring into you a lot of poisons or not. So next time you see your brother reading a novel, you might like to ask, "Dear brother, have you looked deeply into it to see whether there is poison in that novel?" Or if your sister is reading a magazine, you also might like to look and see whether that magazine is healthy, or whether that magazine contains a lot of poisons, a lot of toxins, because we would not like to intoxicate ourselves by consuming those kinds of things. That is also mindfulness of consuming.

Concerning television, I think that is a big issue, because many people have got a lot of violence, craving, hatred, and fear, just because they consume television without mindfulness. So I think we should practice looking deeply, because "to meditate" means to look deeply, to understand, for our own protection, and I think the young people should join us in the practice of looking deeply in order to identify poisons. When you identify poisons in the items of consumption, you should tell yourself that this is not a good thing for consuming, and you tell your friend that this is not a good thing to consume, and that is the practice of meditation. Maybe you don't need to practice for a long time, perhaps just one minute of breathing in and out and looking deeply can reveal the truth. I have friends who are writers, who are film-makers, who are artists, and they are helping us very much in making this kind of mindfulness known to many people, because everyone has to practice mindfulness to protect ourselves, to protect our families, and to protect our society.

I also have friends who are in Congress, and the other day, travelling with such a friend on the train, I had the occasion to suggest to him that he should work with other Congressmen to bring about mindfulness of television consumption. He agreed with me that there is a lot of negative stuff in many television programs, and these TV programs have affected a lot of young people. They have become more violent, they have acted out what they have seen in films, and when they are angry they don't know what to do, or how to handle their anger. They just explode, and if a gun is available, then they would not hesitate to use the gun in order to kill people. That is why our society is now suffering so much, because of so much violence, sex and cravings, and so on. That Congressman, with whom I talked on the train, is an influential Congressman; he's a leader in the Congress and his words are listened to by many of his fellow Congressmen, and he said "Thay, this is a little bit difficult, because in our Constitution, in our Bill of Rights, it is said that people are free to express themselves..." "freedom of speech"...we cannot tamper with the Bill of Rights." I said that we are not proposing anything against the Bill of Rights, because freedom of speech is wonderful, and we don't want to lose it. To declare that everyone is free to say what he wants to say is wonderful. But freedom has to be defined, freedom is not irresponsibility. We cannot, in the name of freedom, allow the destruction of our body and our spirit, and the bodies and spirits of the people in our families and our society. That cannot be described as freedom, because freedom is not destruction. That is why, when we work on an amendment to the Constitution, we also bring about another revolution, and this revolution is going to support the first Revolution. To declare that we should have freedom of speech is a revolution, and we have all profited from that revolution. But to help people understand that freedom is not irresponsibility, that we have to practice mindfulness in order to protect our bodies and our minds, and the bodies and minds of our families, and the collective body and mind of our society, is also a revolution, one which will support and make the first revolution even greater. So the Congressman was very happy, and he was going to go back and talk about that to his fellow Congressmen.

I hope that our friends over here, whether they are young or less young, whether they are educators, or film-makers, or journalists, can do something with their talent to create that kind of awareness, that kind of mindfulness. Supporting every kind of action which will stop the destruction of our bodies and our consciousness through

unmindful consumption. Of course, the basic practice in Plum Village is the practice of the Five Mindfulness Trainings. The fifth Mindfulness Training is about mindful consumption, because mindful consumption seems to be the only way to help us get out of this situation where destruction is going on every day—the destruction of our bodies and our consciousnesses—because of the way we consume, not only edible food, but also sights and sounds, everything.

I trust that the young people will join us in the practice. Please join us to practice breathing deeply and looking deeply to find ways to protect ourselves and our families from that kind of unmindful consumption that will bring a lot of suffering and pain to our bodies and our souls.

So, young people, when you hear the sound of the small bell, please stand up and bow to the Sangha before going out. This is the end of the Dharma talk for very young people.

(Bell)

Perhaps you are familiar with the expression "Pure Land." There is a Buddhist school called the school of the Pure Land. The Pure Land is the land of bliss, the equivalent to the Kingdom of God, where we feel safe, we feel protected, we feel solid, and we feel free—free from afflictions, from anger, from despair. Of course, if we look for a word that describes the opposite, we have the word "Hell." Hell is a place where we have to suffer a lot, where it's very hot. I think all of us have had some taste of Hell. We suffer so much; we are burned by the fire of our anger, our despair, and our afflictions. We know what Hell is. So we aspire to be somewhere else: the Pure Land, the land of bliss, the Kingdom of Heaven. In the teachings of the Buddha, both Hell and the Pure Land are there within yourself, and they exist within every cell of your body. If you allow Hell to manifest, then it will manifest; and if you want the Pure Land, the land of bliss, to manifest, it will manifest. What we learn is that every time Hell is about to manifest, we should be able to be aware of it, and to do something so that Hell will stop manifesting. We could also learn how to give a chance to the Pure Land in us to manifest. Also in Buddhism we have the expression: "crossing over to the other shore," *Paramita*. We may be standing on this shore, the shore of anger, the shore of despair, the shore of ill being, and we don't like it here. We want to cross the river and to get to the other shore. The other shore is the shore of well being, the shore of freedom, the shore of solidity. A good practice is a practice that can allow us to cross over to the other shore.

It is said that every enlightened being, like a Buddha or a bodhisattva, would love to create a Pure Land for himself or herself to be in, and also to welcome friends into that Pure Land. We know that "Buddha" is not the name of a person, Buddha is a word to describe an enlightened person, and Shakyamuni is only one of the Buddhas. There were Buddhas in the past, there are Buddhas in the present moment, and there will be Buddhas in the future. According to the teaching of the Buddha Shakyamuni, each of us is a Buddha-to-be, *un Bouddha devenir*. It means that we have the capacity to be enlightened, to be liberated, and that capacity is in every cell of our bodies. We call it Buddha nature, or *Buddhata*, or *la nature du Bouddha*. The practice is to touch the Buddha nature in us, in order to touch the nature of enlightenment, the nature of freedom, and if we are able to touch that the Pure Land will manifest, and will be available to us.

Last week in a Dharma talk I spoke about the therapist who tried to create a space for people to come and to feel safe, to feel protected, and to work for healing and transformation. I said that the therapist should be an architect, because an architect is someone who creates space for people to live in—space where you feel safe, where you feel protected, where you feel supported in your work of transformation and healing. When the Buddha wants to create a Pure Land, he or she is motivated by the same desire, to create a space for people to come and to feel safe, to be protected, to be supported in the work of transformation and healing. So the Buddha is a kind of therapist, and we can learn from him or her how better to create an environment, for ourselves, for our beloved ones. Because we want ourselves and our beloved ones to be protected, to live in an environment where they can feel safe, where they can get the support they need in order to work for their transformation and healing. A practice center is a kind of "mini-Pure Land."

If you are motivated by the desire to set up a practice center where people can come and touch the wonders of life, and feel protected, then you are on the same path with Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Because I think that what Buddhas and bodhisattvas want most to do is to create a space, a kind of island, a kind of country, where people can come and take refuge. Many of us are sick, in our bodies and our consciousnesses, and we all need therapy. We are exposed to all kinds of sickness, because we have not learned how to protect ourselves, how to consume. Not only can edible food that we eat every day bring a lot of war into our bodies, but the food for our six senses that we ingest every day has brought into our consciousness a lot of war, a lot of poisons, a lot of toxins. We allow our children to be intoxicated in their daily lives, because we have not taught them how to consume mindfully, and we have allowed ourselves to be intoxicated because we have not been careful in consuming.

Even conversation can be highly toxic. Remember that day when you spoke to him or to her—the conversation lasted just one hour, but after the conversation you felt paralyzed, because the content of the conversation was so toxic. There was a lot of sorrow, a lot of despair in the conversation. We did not know that the conversation was toxic, that's why we sat for one hour and we joined in the conversation, and after that we had all the toxins. So, sitting there and watching a television program, or reading an article, or just driving through the city and looking at these images and listening to these sounds can be toxic. We have not known how to protect our bodies and our

consciousness from the invasion of these toxins, and that is why we have gotten sick. Sometimes we create the toxins within ourselves. Our minds, with their imagination, and thinking, can create a lot of ideas, a lot of feelings, a lot of fear, and our depression may come from ourselves, our way of thinking, our way of conceiving things. When we cannot do it anymore, when we feel that we need help, we go to a therapist: to a doctor for our physical pain, and to a psychotherapist when we have a mental problem. The therapist would want to listen to us, to know what is wrong in us, and that is the general tendency—when you come to the therapist you want to tell him or her what is wrong in you, and she always wants to hear what is wrong in you. But in the Buddhist way of practice, we need more than that. Maybe the first thing we need is to touch what is not wrong in us and around us. The therapist, like the Buddha, like the bodhisattva, should be able to create a space where the sick person, upon arrival, will feel better already: a space that can be refreshing and healing, a space where you can feel protected, where you can feel supported. Everything you touch with your eyes, with your ears, and with your body, should be able to support you and to help you.

Creating a space is so important, and in that mini-Pure Land there must be healthy living beings, like trees, birds, plants, water, air, and brothers and sisters who are successful in their practice, namely people who are capable of smiling, of walking peacefully, of sitting peacefully, of drinking tea happily, of cooking or washing with happiness. We need a number of people who are sane, who are healthy, who are refreshing, who are supportive, in order for our Pure Land to be truly a Pure Land. In any Pure Land there would be a number of bodhisattvas, young or less young, a number of Buddhas who are there, ready for us, to welcome us and to protect us and to support us in our practice. A therapist, like a physician, might like to do as Buddhas and bodhisattvas do: they know that people come to them because they are sick, and they want these people to feel better already from the moment that they arrive. So creating an environment is a very important practice.

If the therapist or the physician works alone, and the only instruments they have is their knowledge and a medicine cabinet, that will not be enough. We know how important the environment is. That is why therapists, like doctors, have to come together and operate as a Sangha. To me, it is very important, because therapists and physicians also need support and nourishment, otherwise they will also get sick very quickly. We know of therapists who cannot help themselves, who do not have good relationships with members of their own families, who are not able to transform the suffering within themselves, and in that case, how can they help other people? That is why therapists, as well as physicians, need a Sangha, a Pure Land like us, in order for them to go far, in order not to burn out, in order for them to help more people. They also need protection, nourishment and support. People in the helping professions know it is very easy to burn out, it is very easy to give up half-way; that is why we have to arrange the building up of mini-Pure Lands for our own nourishment and support. It is very crucial in our times.

(Bell)

I know that there are medical centers where doctors and nurses work together as a Sangha, but they don't live there as a Sangha. They don't share with each other. They do share about questions of how to help this patient or the other patient, but they don't have a chance to share with each other their own difficulties, their own negative aspects. But in a practice center, we live as brothers and sisters, and everything that happens to one brother happens to all of us. Everything that happens to a sister happens to all of us. And we practice taking care of the other person.

In Plum Village everyone has a "second body" to take care of, and you have to be aware of anything that happens to your second body. You are aware of the quality of practice of your second body, you are aware of all the difficulties of your second body, and you are in charge of your second body. You try to help, and if you need help from other brothers and sisters, you ask them, but you are the main one responsible for your second body. And your second body also has her second body. Everyone in the Sangha takes care of his or her second body. It means that not only do you have a second body, you have a third body and a fourth body. Your third body is the second body who is taken care of by your second body, and so on. So everyone in the Sangha is your body, and that is why we use the word "Sangha-body," *Sanghakaya*. If you travel as a Sangha, and if your second body has not stepped into the bus, you won't. You have to make sure that she is in that bus. If you are sick, and you need some medicine, or something special to eat, then the person who takes care of you - you are his second body, and he has the duty, the joy, to take care of you. By taking care of one person in the Sangha, you take care of everyone in the Sangha. You practice the teaching of no-self, because you have so many bodies, and you have a big, big body that is the Sangha-body.

To live together twenty-four hours a day as a Sangha is a very important thing, because you can help each other to advance on the path of transformation and healing. Then you can offer yourself as a center, as a place for other people to join you in the practice. Of course, the space has trees, and water, and air, but also it has people, people who know the practice, people who have succeeded in the practice, and they are there for you, they are there to share the practice. For instance, when you arrive in Plum Village, you notice that all the monks and nuns and lay people walk mindfully. There is only one style of walking in Plum Village—that is mindful walking, walking in such a way that every step can bring you healing and transformation. You only accept walking in the Pure Land, you don't walk in Hell. If we allow our afflictions, our anger to overwhelm us, then the place where we walk must be Hell, and soon you'll walk like that. Walk in such a way that each step of yours transforms this very land into the Pure Land. Every step should have the quality of stability and freedom, because walking meditation is not to arrive, walking meditation is to put yourself into the Pure Land. By making steps like that, you transform the very place where you live into a Pure Land, a safe place for yourself, for your brothers and sisters, and those people who come to you to share the practice.

To practice walking meditation is to learn how to live deeply the wonders of life that are available in the here and the now. In the here and the now there may be negative things, like sickness, like fear, like sorrow, but also in the here and now there are refreshing, healing, and wonderful elements. They are to be touched within ourselves, and they are to be touched around us. To go back to the present moment is first of all to touch the positive elements that have the power of transforming and healing, and the therapist, and the Dharma brother, or the Dharma sister will help you to do that from the very first day of your visit. You might have the habit of allowing yourself to be caught in your sorrow, the sorrow of the past: you cannot get rid of the sorrow or the regret concerning the past, and you cannot get rid of your anxiety, your anguish, and your fear about the future. You are not capable of touching life in the here and the now. In the here and the now there are many wonderful, healing and refreshing elements that can help you, but if you are caught by the past and by the future, by your fear, by your anguish, then these elements will not be available to you. So, from the moment you arrive, there should be a brother or a sister helping you, pointing out to you that there are many positive things, that you should get out of your prison of sorrow and fear to get in touch with these things, because these things are healing and nourishing.

If you are a therapist, you can do the same thing: when the other person comes, you'll be able to take his hand or her hand and show him or her that there are positive things to be with, to touch. You don't begin with "What is wrong?" You begin with "What is not wrong?" The practice of Plum Village places much emphasis on that, because while there are things that go wrong, there are still things that do not go wrong. Your own life is like a garden: there may be a number of trees that are dying in the garden of your body, in the garden of your life, but you should know that there are still many vigorous and beautiful trees, and you should not allow the negative aspects to overwhelm you. You have to be able to touch the positive aspects. That is why the environment, and the people who inhabit that environment, should be a support for you, so that you can get out of your prison of sorrow and fear, and touch the wonderful, positive aspects of life that are available. The Buddha is very clear about this. He said: "The past is gone, the future has not yet come; there is only moment for you to live, and that is the present moment." Life is available only in the present moment, and if you miss the present moment you miss your appointment with life. The message is very simple, very clear. It sounds easy, but without a brother, or a sister, or a teacher, without a good environment you cannot do it, you allow yourself to be caught in despair, in the negative. That is why the therapist should be like a Buddha, should be like a bodhisattva. The therapist should be like a Dharma brother, like an architect - capable of creating a space and convening joyful people in that space, in order to help you to touch life.

Walking meditation is a wonderful way to go back to the present moment. Your destination is the here and the now, and if you are to arrive somewhere, that somewhere is the here and the now. So every step should bring you back to the present moment. You arrive with each step. You have been running all your life. You have believed that happiness is not possible in the here and the now—happiness may be possible in the future. That is why you have always sacrificed the present moment for the sake of the future, and you have developed the habit of running. But when we come to a place like Plum Village, the first thing we learn is how to stop running. Only stopping will help us to get in touch with the here and the now. The things that you would like to see and touch the most are available only in the here and the now. The Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha, peace, stability, the kingdom of God, everything, should be contacted in the here and the now. The present moment is the only moment when life is available. That is why it is very important that we make an effort, with the support of these brothers and sisters, to practice stopping.

Stopping is a very important practice of Buddhist meditation. It is only when you have stopped that you can realize calm and concentration, that you can encounter life. That is why the practice of mindfulness is described first of all as the practice of stopping and touching life deeply in the here and the now. To be mindful means to be here, fully present, fully alive; not to be caught in forgetfulness, not to be caught in the past and the future; to make yourself available in the here and the now, to be fully present. What does it mean to be fully present? To be in a state of being where body and mind are fully united with each other. That state of being we call the oneness of body and mind. Usually in our daily lives our body may be here, but our mind is not here, it is caught in the past or the future, it is caught in our anguish, our projects, our fear--so you are not really here. The practice of mindful walking, or mindful breathing, can help you to bring body and mind back together. Our body may be here, but our mind is going in another direction. That is what happens in our daily lives. Between the body and mind, there is something that connects the two like a bridge, and that is our breath, our mindful breathing. The moment when you hold to your breath and breathe in and out mindfully, your body and your mind will come together, and that is the first exercise of mindful breathing that the Buddha proposed: "Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in; breathing out, I know that I am breathing out."

There is a discourse given by the Buddha, called the *Anapanasati Sutra* (the *Discourse on Mindful Breathing*), and in that discourse he proposed sixteen breathing exercises for transformation and healing. Just a month ago I offered a twenty-one day retreat in North America on the theme of Mindful Breathing, and about four hundred people practiced together, just the sixteen exercises on mindful breathing for transformation and healing. If you had been there, you would have witnessed the transformation of so many people. When you practice mindful breathing, you naturally bring your body and your mind back together, and the exercise is so simple: "Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in; breathing out, I know that I am breathing out." It is the practice of identifying the in-breath as in-breath, and the out-breath as out-breath. It is like a children's game, and yet the outcome is very great.

Mindful of your in-breath, mindful of your out-breath, you become concentrated. The object of your concentration is

your in-breath. "Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in. " Suppose that this pen symbolizes the length of my in-breath: I begin to breathe in here, and I finish my in-breath here. Usually we don't breathe mindfully, but now the practice is mindful breathing, and for that reason we need to bring our minds into it. Suppose my finger is my mindfulness. Mindfulness is always mindfulness of something. I can be mindful of this flower. I can be mindful of the pen, and I can be mindful of my in-breath. Suppose this is my in-breath. It begins like this: "Breathing in, I know I am breathing in," and you are mindful all the way through, "this is my in-breath, this is my in-breath," and you nourish that mindfulness of life all the way through. By doing so, you are perfectly concentrated on your in-breath, and you stop all other thinking. The past is no longer a prison; the future is no longer a prison; you are going back to your in-breath, which is something that is happening in the here and the now. "Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in." You might like to use the sentence, because that is the sentence that is proposed by the Buddha. Or you might like to have a shorter version of the sentence, using only the word "in." "In... Out..."

These words, "in" and "out" are the means for you to nourish your mindfulness of life, mindfulness of in-breath or mindfulness of out-breath. You will get the "stopping" that you need. In our daily lives we keep thinking of this, or thinking of that—we never stop. There is something like a cassette tape, turning non-stop, day and night. And sometimes we think too much, and the thinking is not helpful, the thinking is sometimes harmful. It does not seem to be true that "I think, therefore I am," because thinking brings me out of myself, it does not help me to be in the here and the now, so the quality of being is lost. I think, therefore I am not. Sometimes our heads are like a television set that is left on for a long time and becomes very hot: so much thinking, so many worries, make our heads hot. Sometimes we cannot sleep because we cannot stop the thinking. With a cassette tape, it's easy, because there is a button you can push to stop it. But there is no button here.

When you find it too difficult to sleep because of your thinking, you get alarmed and go to a doctor, who gives you a prescription. Even with that kind of drug, you don't get stopped. Even during your sleep, which is not natural, you continue to run, you continue to think, and you continue to have nightmares. But this is a natural process of stopping, just mindful breathing, and you may enjoy it a lot. Just sit there, or lie down in a relaxed way, and just enjoy your in-breath and out-breath. Because breathing can be very enjoyable, especially when your nose is free, when your lungs are good, and the air around you is clean. The pleasure of breathing! There were times in the past when you were nearly suffocated, with things like asthma, or your stuffy nose, or the quality of the air prevented your enjoying that kind of breathing. But it is still possible for you to enjoy breathing. One of the things that we do during the practice of sitting meditation and walking meditation is to just enjoy our mindful breathing, and to make ourselves available to life, namely, to the here and the now. If you practice mindful breathing, in and out like that for five minutes, you get five minutes of stopping. You don't think during these five minutes. You give yourself a chance to rest, whether in a sitting position, in a walking position or in a lying position. If you want fifteen minutes of rest like that, you just practice fifteen minutes of mindful breathing, in and out. This is the first exercise in the *Discourse on Mindful Breathing*, you may also like to try the second exercise, which is also nice. There are sixteen exercises.

When you practice mindful breathing, you bring your mind and body together, and you attain that state of being called "the oneness of body and mind." It means the state of being present. You become fully alive and fully present. If you are alive and fully present, if you are really there, someone or something else will be there also at the same time. That is life, because when you make yourself available to life, life will make herself available to you. This is clear. Suppose you are standing there, and enjoying the beautiful sunset. In order to really enjoy the beautiful sunset, you have to be there one hundred percent, body and mind united. If you stand there with other people, and yet you allow your mind to be caught by your worries, the past and the future, then the beautiful sunset will not be for you. That is why the basic condition is that you be there fully, and if you are there fully, then the beautiful sunset will be yours.

To make ourselves available to life is the first practice, and you can do it just by taking steps, or by taking in-breaths and out-breaths, and you have freed yourself. That is already the practice of freedom. You have freed yourself from the past, from the future, from your worries, and just going back and enjoying your in-breath and your out-breath, you have become alive. Now, the wonders of life become available to you. Touch what is positive, touch what is beautiful, refreshing, nourishing and healing around you, and do that with the support of the brothers and sisters who are already there and who have the experience of the practice.

(Bell)

Having sickness in your body, or sorrow or pain in your consciousness, does not prevent your practicing, and your getting in touch with positive elements of life. Please do not wait until you do not have anything wrong in your body or your consciousness to enjoy life, to enjoy the practice. You'll never get it. Perfect health is just an idea—perfect health does not exist. All of us have some problem in our bodies, or in our consciousness. All of us have some pain or sorrow in our consciousness. Some of us have some problems in our bodies. But it is like a garden with a few trees dying, but where all the other trees are still solid, vigorous and beautiful. Therefore, we should not allow these few negative elements to block the way. We should learn, with the support of the Sangha, to touch the positive elements of our environment, of our selves, for the sake of nourishment and healing. That is why a Sangha is important. When you have an opportunity to be with the Sangha, please do take advantage of the presence of the Sangha, because there are things you can do very easily in the presence of the Sangha. These things become difficult when you find yourself alone at home. Sitting meditation, walking meditation, enjoying a silent meal, all these things become very easy if you do it together with the Sangha, because the Sangha radiates the collective energy of

mindfulness, and you feel supported by the energy.

Suppose you have just come to Plum Village, and when you observe, you see that the monks, the nuns, the lay brothers and sisters enjoy mindful walking, mindful breathing, and mindful sitting. That creates a collective energy. If you allow yourself to be transported by the vehicle of the Sangha, you already begin to profit. The energy has begun to penetrate your body and consciousness. Allow yourself to be in the Sangha, allow yourself to be penetrated by the collective energy of the Sangha. That means the process of transformation and healing has already taken place. Surrender to the Sangha. The Sangha is a community where every member practices mindfulness of walking, mindfulness of sitting, mindfulness of breathing, in order to go back to the present moment and to become fully alive. That practice has the power of healing and transforming. When you join the Sangha you just allow yourself to be transported by the Sangha, as if transported by a boat. The boat will carry us—don't resist. You don't have to be polite, you don't have to find words to say to this brother or sister. You are here in order to enjoy the Sangha, you don't have to say anything, to be polite. Don't ask questions about whether you should bow or not bow, these things are not important. If you enjoy it, if you are mindful of the things that are happening in the present moment, bowing or not bowing will not be a problem.

The rituals, all these things, are not important at all. What is important is that you become alive. The Sangha is not an obstacle, the Sangha is an opportunity, because you might feel very safe in the Sangha. In fact, mindfulness practice is the practice of protection, because our mindfulness is the energy that can protect us, help us not to get lost in our worries, in our fear, in our anger. When that energy is there, we can profit from it. That is why, when you come to a practicing Sangha, you feel that you are safe. You are safe because other people are practicing protecting themselves and protecting the Sangha at the same time. Even the living beings around feel safer, because we are mindful and we do our best not to do harm to them, and to trees and insects. That is why safety should exist in the mini-Pure Land, in a practice center, in the space created by Buddhas, bodhisattvas, therapists, and so on.

(Bell)

When you go back to the present moment, you may discover something wonderful, you may touch something wonderful. Like when you are walking you find out something valuable that you had not realized existed before, yet it is there. When going back to the here and the now, and becoming fully alive, you have the chance to identify it, such as the fact that you are alive. There are many things that are wonderful, among them the fact that you are still alive. To be still alive is a miracle. You have seen a dead person—no matter what you try to do, you cannot make him or her come back to life. Yet, when you go back to the here and the now, and become fully present, you may discover many wonderful things, among these the fact that you are alive. To be still alive is a miracle, is the greatest miracle. That is one thing we can treasure, we can value, and we can be joyful about. It is a jewel, the greatest jewel, that we are alive. We also find out that because we have not been able to touch that fact, that miracle, we have allowed life to go away. There were days when we were not alive at all, when we did not really live our lives deeply. We have allowed days and months to pass by like that, like water through our fingers. We did not touch the wonders, the miracle of life, during those days and months. If someone were to ask you the question of whether the most wonderful moment of your life has arrived or not, you might be tempted to say, "Well, it does not seem that the most wonderful moment of my life has arrived, but I am sure it will have to arrive soon." That famous "most wonderful moment" of our lives...when you look deeply into it, you see that if you continue to live without mindfulness, the way you have lived the last twenty years of your life, then that most wonderful moment of your life is not likely to happen during the next twenty years. We have not allowed that moment to arrive. It's not because it does not want to arrive, it's because in the past we have not allowed it to arrive, because we were always running. So we missed life, we missed the greatest miracle of our lives.

According to the teachings of the Buddha, it is possible to make the present moment into the most wonderful moment of your life. If you wake up, if you are capable of waking up to the fact that you are alive, then you know how precious this moment is. We should do our best to make the most of it, to profit from it, and to live our lives deeply in that moment. That is really the practice of Buddhism. The word "*buddh*" means to wake up, and "Buddha" just means "the one who is awake, who has awakened." When you are awake, you touch that miracle 'that I am alive', and that is very precious. So you know that you have something very valuable. And when you encounter something negative, when you get angry, when you feel irritated, when you feel that you don't like standing on this shore, the shore of affliction, fear, jealousy, despair, and you want to cross over to the other shore, the shore of well being, joy and freedom, you can go back to the present moment and touch the miracle, because you have stored these wonders within yourself. Just breathing in and out and touching these wonders, you'll be able to cross to the other shore very quickly, and suddenly what bothers you, what makes you unhappy can disappear right away.

In a sutra the Buddha described the practice as "changing the peg." A carpenter can use a peg to connect two blocks of wood, and if he finds that the old peg is no good, he would like to change it with another peg. Just by driving the new peg into the old one, he can replace the old one with the new one. So if you have a state of being that you don't like, you can change the peg. That peg is called a mental formation. We have fifty-one categories of mental formation. Fear is one, anger is another one, and jealousy is another one. If you don't like it, change the peg: use another peg and change it. And since you have stored within yourself many wonderful pegs, it is very easy for you to take one of the pegs and just change it. Then, suddenly, you find yourself on the other shore. And by going back to the present moment, you will discover these pegs, these wonders that belong to life, that are available to you: the positive things that you can identify through your full presence. That is why it is said that our true home is in the

here and the now; and if you practice going back to your true home, you'll be able to meet, to touch, to identify these wonderful things, these miracles that will be available to you every time you need them. Crossing to the other shore is a matter of seconds or minutes if you are already capable of identifying the positive things that are still available to you. Among them I just mentioned one: the fact that you are still alive.

Do not allow your afflictions to overwhelm you and to imprison you, because you are more than that. You are more than your afflictions, you are more than your jealousy, your fear. The Buddha said that you have the capacity of joy, of peace, of enlightenment. The Buddha nature is in you, in every cell of your being, and the practice is deep touching. Deep touching is possible when you go back to the here and the now.

I would like to invite all of you to join in walking meditation. Walking meditation is a very wonderful way to go back to the present moment, and to learn how to live deeply in this moment. All of us in Plum Village, as permanent residents, have made the commitment to only walk mindfully. If you learn to walk like that for only one week, you may develop a good habit, and you may be able to learn to live much more deeply every minute of your daily life. Many of us have signed a treaty with our stairs. To begin with, you make the vow that every step you make up the stairs will be mindful, and if halfway up you realize that one of these steps was not taken mindfully, you will go down and begin climbing up again. The same thing must be true when you go down. If you are caught by an idea, by a project, and if you don't go down step by step mindfully, then you go up and go down again. Your stair set may be eighteen or twenty, and you can sign a treaty with it. I myself have done so many years ago, twenty years ago, and in the last twenty years I have never taken one step without mindfulness, whether I go up or I go down. Now when I climb the *Grdhrakuta* Mountain, or the *Wu Tai Shan* Mountain, or whether I walk at the airport, or I climb on the airplane, I always climb and take steps mindfully.

My practice, as well as the practice of many of us here, is that every step should be able to help you to be alive in the here and the now, and to cultivate more freedom and stability and joy. So you may like to try to do the same, and select a distance from your tent or your room to a certain tree, maybe three meters, or five meters, and sign a treaty with it. And every time you go by that distance, practice as I do when I climb the stairs. If you find that you have forgotten, you go back. You don't have to go to the meditation hall in order to practice mindfulness. You practice mindfulness right there in your tent. Begin with that, and when you have succeeded with that distance, you go everywhere mindfully, and you stop running, stop inside and stop outside. There are many of us who continue to run during our sleep, and when we sit down to enjoy our lunch together, as a Sangha, we continue to run. There are those of us who can settle down and enjoy our lunch, and enjoy the presence of the brothers and sisters around us, but there are many of us who are still running during lunchtime. Stopping is our practice, stopping first, in order to get the calm and the concentration we need. Then to practice looking deeply is just another step.

(Three bells)

(End of talk)

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